



Critical Theory and the Literary Text: Symbiotic Compatibility or Mutual Exclusivity? A Personal Response

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Critical Theory and the Literary Text: Symbiotic Compatibility or Mutual Exclusivity? A Personal Response

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1. It seems to me that critical theory and the literary text are never far from each other. Whoever reads English (or for that matter, any language) can read a poem, a story, a novel, or a play, but that does not in itself make that reader a teacher or critic of literature, which is what concerns us here. As soon as we go beyond simple and naive reading to any level of sophistication, we enter into the realm of literary theory and criticism. Since Plato and Aristotle, there is a long tradition in the West of critical theories that have always informed readings and interpretations of the literary text. Some of the theories are not literary or even aesthetic in the narrow sense of the word, but more properly belong to philosophy, religion, or some other spheres of human knowledge, but they are nonetheless important for the understanding of literature. We can think of Plato, Augustine, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, and many others. Commenting on the French effort to understand German literature, Heinrich Heine once said that "The best production of our literature will remain for them only mute blossoms, the whole German mind a dreary puzzle, so long as they do not know the significance of religion and philosophy in Germany."[1] I take that to be true of the relationship between literature and its philosophical, cultural, and historical milieu in any tradition. So the question is not really compatibility versus exclusivity, but how we should explore the literary text in its theoretical context, how to analyze and unfold the text so that we may understand and communicate with it in a critical dialogue, and not, to borrow Heine's metaphor again, to face literary works as so many "mute blossoms" that do not speak to us.

2. But if we expect literary theory to help unfold the text and eventually to enrich our understanding of literature, we may be disappointed with much of contemporary theory that does little of this. In reading critical essays that employ a distinctly theoretical discourse of one or more of the contemporary "schools" of theory or semi-theory, notably deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Marxism, New Historicism, feminism, postcolonialism and so forth, we may often feel inundated with heavily philosophical or political arguments that have little bearing on the literary text. The language is often opaque and

jargon-ridden, the argument one-sided and high-handed, the stylistic posture militant and self-righteous: such writings can be frustrating, irritating, and exasperating. Nearly ten years ago, a *TriQuarterly* book entitled *Criticism in the University* collected a number of essays that diagnosed the problem of contemporary theory as the specialization of literary criticism as an academic "field" or profession detached from "literary culture" at large and from literature itself.[2] More recently, Alvin Kernan has catalogued the various symptoms of the collapse of American literary culture, the demise of print culture as a whole in the age of TV and Nintendos, in which sophisticated theories curiously reflect the tendency of the times by assuming a hostile attitude toward literature and arguing for its incoherence, unreadability, and the impossibility of meaning. The theories of deconstruction, New Historicism, Marxism, and feminism, says Kernan, "have discounted literature by accusing it of ignorance at best, bad faith at worst, of playing a purposeful and cunning part in the imperialistic and financial power games of Western society, imposing and strengthening the hegemony of one class, or sex, or ideology, or race over others." Much of contemporary theory performs the function of what Kernan calls the "poetics of illiteracy" and "appear like destroying angels, seeking the death of literature by showing that it doesn't exist, that its putative poets don't write it, that its language is meaningless, that it has in the past only been the instrument of masculine attempts to dominate the female or of capitalism's exploitation of the masses."3 Given the polemical nature of critical discourse in recent debates, for example, the debate about canon or about Paul de Man's collaborationist papers, the atmosphere is so politicized and antagonistic that there is hardly any sense of the enjoyment of literature, the pleasure of the text, and hardly any appreciation of the aesthetic and moral values that we used to attribute to great works of literature. Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that the relationship between critical theory and the literary text becomes highly problematic.

3. The current situation is certainly not satisfactory, but complaining about theory or taking an anti-theoretical position can hardly solve the problem. Theory is not outside the study of literature but has always formed its background and provided it with basic assumptions. If what we do as teachers and critics of literature is always informed by theoretical assumptions and concepts, whether consciously acknowledged or not, then we cannot be really "against theory" without having impoverished the study of literature itself. This is not to say, however, that we must accept doctrines of the various theories and become myrmidons of any particular "school" of criticism. In fact, to take a truly theoretical or critical position means that we must first of all think critically of theory itself and argue against what we see as erroneous

theoretical excesses. Theory does not belong to theoreticians, and by engaging in theoretical debates, each of us can make a difference and change whatever we feel is not satisfactory. Indeed, why theory must bear the banner of a particular color, be it deconstructionist, feminist, or Marxist? Why cannot theory or theories be plural and pluralistic? Personally I am always interested in different critical theories, but I always try to keep a critical distance and refuse to follow any one particular theory blindly. As I see it, to think independently is an intellectual responsibility, and to make theory and the literary text work together is the only way to make literary studies a meaningful and gratifying activity. In my own field of East-West comparative studies, as Claudio Guillén recently argues, literary theory provides the basic legitimating ground for comparison. Unconcerned with the positivistic notion of actual contact or influence, East-West comparative studies work best in the context of large theoretical issues, in rethinking such basic questions as those of language, expression, understanding, interpretation, etc. East-West comparative study is never a matter of juxtaposition, of putting together side by side Chinese and Western literary texts or theories, but the comparative work is always something to be redefined through a rigorous study of the basic issue, a new set of problems that can be raised and explored only in the comparison of different works, texts, and theoretical notions. "The theoretical framework," says Guillén, "suggests the statement of the problem."[4] That is to say, comparative literature, and East-West comparative studies in particular, form a natural alliance with critical theories. Therefore I cannot set literature and literary theory in a rigid opposition. Those who argue "against theory" may quote Goethe's famous lines:

> Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie
> Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum.

But let us remember that this is not Goethe, but Mephistopheles speaking.

Notes

1. Heinrich Heine, *Concerning the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany*, trans. Helen Mustard, in *The Romantic School and Other Essays*, ed. Jost Hermand and Robert C. Holub (New York: Continuum, 1985), p. 128.

2. See *Criticism in the University*, ed. Gerald Graff and Reginald Gibbons, *TriQuarterly* Series on Criticism and Culture, No. 1 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1985).

3. Alvin Kernan, *The Death of Literature* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990), pp. 76, 145.

4. Claudio Guillén, *The Challenge of Comparative Literature*, trans. Cola Franzen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 70.